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ABSTRACT

The involvement of the community is absolutely essential in planning for declining enrollment and school closing. Through the use of the community task force, the frequently painful decisions entailed by a no-growth policy can be made more palatable. There are three types of task forces (the indepth seminar, the six- to eight-week study group, and the extended study committee). The task force may be led by an outside consultant, a central office administrator, a board-appointed leader, or a leader elected from within the group. The composition of the committee should be representative of the community as a whole. Organizational structure is all-important if the task force is to accomplish its duties (for example, specifying which schools will be closed first). Decision-making models such as KEPEC can assist in identifying evaluation criteria, which usually include economic, facility, and social factors. An example of how this decision-making model is applied in a hypothetical school district indicates the process to be followed by the task force. (DS)

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# ENROLLMENT DECLINE: THE TASK FORCE

Today in 1975, after three decades of unprecedented growth, communities across the country are, once again, struggling to keep pace - to keep pace not with the demands posed by growth, but with the need to evaluate and reorder priorities. Priorities which must now be in keeping with the needs of a shrinking school population and an aging society.

During the mid-seventies, a period marked by unemployment and financial urgency, tax-paying citizens, board of education leaders, and school administrators, alike, have taken part in the scramble for competing dollars to be allocated to schools. Many of us have witnessed the slow but steady erosion of our educational programs and personnel - science, music, art and phys. ed. specialists, a school principal or two, one or more central office administrators. In addition, curriculum projects, research and development funds, and the special attentions to individualized instruction - lost to a considerable extent because scarce resources and personnel are spread out in increasingly underutilized school buildings across a district.

As we, education's professional designers, struggle to tailor the imperatives of providing quality



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educational experiences with and for geometrically regressive numbers of school children, decisions of school demolition rather than school construction are ours today; decisions of space-consolidation for more effective utilization rather than space-expansion are ours today; and decisions of personnel reduction rather than personnel addition are ours today.

From an historical perspective, an era is characterized by the problems and decisions that face the people of its time; the problems before us and the decisions required of us in the 70's, have involuntarily transferred us into a new era - an era of no growth. . . a time of retrenchment.

Concomitent with retrenchment and no growth, our ear is also said to be a time characterized by a lack of faith in the fiber of public officials and a lack of confidence in the fabric of public institutions. The public disrobing of Nixon, the loosely-threaded weave in the cloth of our government, the stark nudity of Watergate, and the recent CIA exposures have subjected the ready-to-wear-made mantle of all public figures, superintendents included, to the scrutinizing eye of a custom-tailored public.

Our decisions, in an era of no growth must be neatly measured, precisely tailored and carefully fitted - the yards and yards of cloth available to us,

as the chief tailors of education, during the growth years of the 50's and 60's provided us with the opportunities, in many districts, to be somewhat unrestrained creative designers. . .measuring, cutting and fitting quality programs - with enough extra material to cover slight miscalculations.

Today, the opportunity to design unchallenged is gone,the extra bolts of cloth are gone, the margin of error is gone. What we are left with is a magnificently designed, superbly-crafted and custom-fitted educational suit of clothing on a district that has lost weight. . .and a community that wants to take up the scissors, needle and thread.

Our ear is one of status-quo growth, a decreasing level of public confidence, and an increasing demand for community involvement.

One of the most important decisions facing school administrators is the "who", "when", "where", and "how" of public involvement. In tomorrow's mini-clinic session the speaker will discuss the general aspects of community involvement. My role, here today, is to deal with one specific type of involvement - the Task Force.

Some years ago I wrote a filmstrip for AASA entitled "Dwindling Enrollments and School Closings," subtitled "S.T. George and the Dragon." S. T. George was the superintendent of a mythical district and the dragon, of course, was the embodiment of a school

closing and all its inherent problems. Throughout the filmstrip, Dr. George battled with the dragon.

He faced the emotional and angry public.

He supported central office administrators, principals, teachers, and ancillary staff.

He found himself manning the helm of his ship, clutching enrollment charts and graphs while board members cast about for life preservers.

And in his mind's eye he saw himself leaving the district as his replacement came in. . .riding high on the educationally sound, but politically disastrous, decisions he had made. The political reality of this visual image moved Dr. George to the realization that school closings are people problems, first and foremost. At this point in the story, Dr. George employs a variety of people-oriented involvement techniques. And, finally, in the end, S. T. George walks off into the sunset, arm in arm, with a friendly dragon. All fairy tales have happy endings.

As districts around the country began facing their own school closing dragons - one theme seemed to be re-current. School closings are people problems. . . community involvement was crucial.

Of all the community involvement techniques the one which seems to be the most widely utilized is the Task Force. Some districts have had overwhelming success experiences, while others suffered crushing disasters. What made the difference? There appear to

be four or five key decisions that are crucial determiners of success or failure.

First, the length of time and type of Task Force. Basically there are three models: indepth Seminar Approach, Study Group, or Extended Study Committee.

The Indepth Seminar Approach might extend over two weekends. Four full days of study from 9-5 on two Saturdays and Sundays. The Study Group approach might extend over 6 to 8 weeks, meeting once or twice a week. Or the third type, the Extended Study Committee Approach which might extend over 9-12 months, meeting once or twice a month.

A second key decision is the leadership and composition of the Task Force. In regard to leadership, you can use an outside consultant as a leader, central office administrator as a leader, board appointed leader, elected leader from within the group.

In regard to composition, there is only one option. .the widest possible. The broadest-based community/teacher/PTA/religions/civic/political/ business representation that can be recruited.

The third key decision is selection of members. Members can be selected by board appointment, on a volunteer basis, as organization representatives, or the organization of presidents.

The fourth key decision is the charge to the Task Force. The charge may be broad and all

encompassing "to study the problem and make a recommendation", or narrow and specific "to recommend 1 school consolidation plan."

While these considerations are important, the most crucial decision, and the one presenting the greatest problem for most superintendents is: "Once you get them together, WHAT ARE THEY REALLY GOING TO DO? and HOW ARE THEY GOING TO DO IT?

The greatest need in Task Forcing is organizational structure. In an attempt to meet this need and to offer some concrete examples of how other districts have proceeded with their task forcing efforts, I want to share this case study with you.

The district that S. T. George is superintendent of is experiencing an enrollment decline. Over the next two years they expect to drop by 750 pupils or 10%. The district operates 10 schools: one 2500 pupil senior high school, two 1,000 pupil junior high schools and seven 500 pupil elementary schools.

Because it was obvious to the board and the superintendent that some kind of educational consolidation was going to be probable, the board sent invitations to all civic, religious, community, school, professional and non-professional organizations in the community. Each organization was asked to elect 1 or 2 representatives to serve on a Task Force.

Under the leadership of an outside consultant,

the Task Force was charged to recommend a school consolidation plan for the district. Eleven alternate plans were provided. . .from closing no schools, to variations including reorganization of grade level patterns.

Many late night meetings took place and many alternatives were explored. A decision was finally made to recommend the closing of one, possibly two elementary schools over a three year period. The Jefferson Street school was proposed as the first school to be closed. The following describes how that task force worked toward reaching their recommendations.

The Task Force's first meeting was a difficult one. Some members came to the meeting with prepared statements: "The Northeast Civic Association has taken a vote of its membership and feels that all schools should remain open." Or already-made decisions: "My figures show that Oak Street Elementary should be closed," said another. "As leader of this group. . ." the leader then led the group toward accomplishing the objectives set for the first meeting. . . very important objectives, for they will go far in determining the degree to which the group will function smoothly.

First, establishing a calendar of meeting dates - this may seem obvious to us, but it is all too often overlooked.

Second, making a decision about meeting format open to the public or closed.

Next, identifying resource people who may be helpful by providing specific or technical information or clarifying district data.

After much discussion, the Task Force made two preliminary decisions.

1. That a facility consolidation was going to be necessary, and
2. That one of the elementary schools would have to be closed. The questions now facing the group were:

WHICH ONE AND

HOW TO DECIDE

It was obvious that no one wanted their local neighborhood school closed. . .no matter how much would be saved. It was also obvious that some form of criteria for studying each school and deciding which should be closed needed to be established; and that some kind of weighting system had to be employed.

The group became frustrated and finally stalemated. Arguments broke out. Some members took violent stands pushing their point of view while others, hard-nosed, ignored such emotional outbursts. The isolatery feelings of decision making weighed heavily upon all.

The responsibility of decision making placed

upon a Task Force member is a mighty one. He will need to bring to his study the ability to think clearly and rationally. He will need the ability to see not only beyond today or tomorrow, but years ahead. He will need the ability for openness and receptivity of alternate points of view, and an understanding of human behavior.

Some key decisions, then, when organizing a Task Force, revolve around length of time and type, leadership, composition, selection of membership, and charge to the group.

All of these are difficult and important decisions - and the overwhelming caution I offer is to match your decisions to fit your community. . .again, custom-tailoring.

Indepth Seminars are most successful in highly sophisticated, cosmopolitan communities. Communities where group process techniques are known and understood. The indepth Seminar model should be employed only when the community is fully aware of the reality of a school closing, preferably led by an outside consultant, with a very specific charge, and complete facts, figures and district must be provided.

The 6 to 8 week Study Group approach has been successful in any type of community; but because of the minimal study time should preferably be used when school consolidation has bedn discussed for some time in the community. This approach should be organized

with a specific charge, and full district data available.

Extended Study Committees are best employed when school consolidation is barely a reality for the community. . .when the thought of consolidation is just beginning to be murmured. Organizational structure as well as a decision-making model or vehicle needs to be available for Task Forces.

One possible model for decision making in school consolidation is KEMEC.

There are nine boxes in the KEMEC grid. Each box has a value represented by a color. The green color zone boxes are valued at 1 point.

The yellow color zone boxes at 2 points.

The green/yellow and red/yellow color zone box at 3 points.

The red/yellow color zone box at 4 points.

The red color zone box at 5 points.

By identifying criteria for evaluation each school in a district, and then placing these criteria in a priority order, each school could be measured and an indexed ranking would be provided. The Task Force agreed that this would provide some objectivity to their study. They began identifying criteria.

Four criteria items were immediately identified for use with KEMEC:

Safety

It was agreed that pupil safety was a major concern. Children should not have to cross hazardous intersections or major highways on their way to school. Therefore, each of the seven elementary schools should be studied in terms of their geographic setting.

Academic Excellence

Academic excellence was also a major concern. Each school should have a good inventory of academic performance in its educational program. This factor should also be considered when studying each of the elementary schools.

Socio-economic, ethnic and racial composition

Each school should be represented and reflective of the total community, not just one segment. Therefore, each school should be studied in terms of its representativeness in socio-economic ethnic and racial terms.

Rate of enrollment decline

And, the rate of enrollment decline at each school was considered as an important factor. Which school showed the greatest drop-off? Four additional criteria factors were identified and agreed upon:

Recyclability of the building itself would be an important consideration, as well as,

Could the building be sold, rented,

The capital outlay costs for needed improvements in each building (in next 5-10 years)

What was the condition in each building?

The educational flexibility of the building would be important, and

Was each building fully equipped -

Did each building present a flexible plant for the eduational program -

The transportation costs for each should also b e a factor in the decision. Even though busing costs are 90% reimbursable children should not spend extra hours riding around town. While there are others, it was decided that these eight factors would serve as the basis for use with KEMEC.

On a percentage scale totalling 100 percent each item was ranked. The four most important factors they saw as safety, academic excellence, socio0economic ethnic and racial composition, and rate of enrollment decline, 15 percent each; 60 percent of the KEMEC index would be influenced by these four items. The last four, recyclability, capital outlay, educational flexibility, and transportation costs would be 10 percent each; these would make up the remaining 40 percent.

The subsequent meetings of the Task Force were devoted to studying each building in regard to the established criteria. Resource people were used for specific information. For example, the projected capital outlay costs needed for improvements were

provided by an assistant superintendent for business.

The transportation supervisor was invited to meet with the Task Force and provide busing costs.

The assistant superintendent for instruction was requested by the Board to provide some statistical data for the group in regard to the academic performance of the students in each school.

Local real estate people and architects were contacted and invited to a meeting to offer input on the sale, rental or recyclability of the seven elementary buildings.

Each building was studied and information was plotted on KEMEC. Jefferson Street school was the school chosen to be closed. It scored in the following way:

First, it was established that compared to the other schools in the district, Jefferson's per pupil costs were high.

A dot was placed in the high box and a horizontal line drawn through all the high boxes, as shown.

In terms of <u>safety</u>, Jefferson Street school was in a highly hazardous geographic setting. On one side of the school was a four lane highway, and directly behind the school was a trucking company's garage. Parents had frequently been concerned with the heavy trucking traffic in the area. On the KEMEC grid - the degree of hazard was evaluated.

A dot was placed in the highly hazardous box and a vertical line drawn through all the high boxes, as shown.

These two lines intersect in a red color zone. A red color zone receives a weighting of five points on KEMEC. So, on safety, Jefferson Street school scored five points. 5 x 15 = 75.

Again, the per pupil costs are a constant and that dot and line has already been drawn.

In terms of socio-economic, ethnic and racial composition of the school, when compared to the total community, Jefferson Street school was representative. Jefferson Street school had a good mix of students, drawing from three distinct socio-economic areas. This balance had been created a few years ago when the district changed attendance boundary areas to establish a reflective population in each school.

A dot was placed in the representative box and a vertical line drawn through all the representative boxes, as shown. The lines intersect in a yellow color zone. The KEMEC value for a yellow color zone is two points. So, on socio-economic ethnic and racial composition, Jefferson Street school scored two points.

2 x 15 = 30

Next, it was established that Jefferson was experiencing rapid enrollment decline compared to the other schools in the district. There were a great number of empty seats in Jefferson's classrooms.

A dot was placed in the rapid box and a vertical line drawn through all the rapid boxes, as shown. These

two lines intersect in a red color zone. On KEMEC, a red color zone receives a weighting of five points. So, on rate of enrollment decline, Jefferson Street school scored five points.

5 x 15% = 75

Jefferson Street school scored a total of 420 points. It was the highest, by far, in the district. Thus, being the most desirable for closing as measured by the district's criteria and priorities on KEMEC. The information from KEMEC was used as only one part of the final decision to recommend the closing of Jefferson Street school.

The task force read plans submitted to them from community members, civic groups and other interested parties.

They evaluated data from an informal poll, and made personal visits to the schools.

They looked at the pattern of the elementary feeder schools into the two junior highs and carefully considered what closing a feeder elementary would mean to each junior high.

In this case their recommendation to close Jefferson School coincided with that suggested by KEMEC. In some communities, however, the unique considerations that are not measurable by KEMEC may result in the second or third ranked KEMEC-indexed school to be recommended for closing. In the task force's final report (submitted to the superintendent and the board), each

plan, piece of information or letter received was included in an appendix section. From this point on, the responsibility is the board's. The job of the task force members had been completed.

The board took under advisement the Task Force recommendations - and with additional input from the superintendent made a decision to close Jefferson School.